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## THE ALLEGORICAL FIGURE GENIUS

By E. C. KNOWLTON

Genius is an allegorical figure<sup>1</sup> which was conspicuously employed by Alanus de Insulis, a celebrated Latin poet of the twelfth century, by Jean de Meun, the chief satirist of the thirteenth century, and by Gower, Chaucer's friend. The origin and development of this literary personage, however, have not, I believe, been indicated. The purpose of the present article is, therefore, to outline the presumable early history of Genius, so far as extant documents permit.

Though the Genius of medieval poetry resembles slightly the Genius who appears in Addison<sup>2</sup> and authors of the eighteenth century he is rather to be defined as an associate of *Natura*, a figure well known to readers of Latin, French, Italian, and English literature of the Middle Ages as a great creative agent. Somebody like him first appeared in Claudian's *Second Panegyric on the Consulship of Stilicho*.<sup>3</sup> The situation is that Sol has driven his chariot to the region where he can get a year fit for the authority of the distinguished general:

Est ignota procul nostraeque impervia menti,  
Vix adeunda deis, annorum squalida mater,  
Immensi spelunca aevi, quae tempora vasto  
Suppeditat revocatque sinu. Complectitur antrum,  
Omnia qui placido consumit numine, serpens  
Perpetuumque viret squamis caudamque reductam  
Ore vocat tacito relegens exordia lapsu.

<sup>1</sup> The discussion is based on a portion of a doctoral dissertation, *Natura as an Allegorical Figure*, presented at Harvard University in 1918.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the *Tabula of Cebes* (Κέβητος Πίναξ), possibly of the first century of our era. The tablet, viewed by the author and his friends in the temple of Chronos, is explained by an old man as the passage of man through life. Before people enter the gate of life therein represented, they are warned concerning Fortune and many other matters by an aged man, Genius, who, incidentally, has a paper in one hand. The dialogue was frequently employed in English schools from Elizabethan times on.—See the edition, C. S. Jerram, *Cebetis Tabula* (Oxford, 1878); cf. R. T. Clark, *The Characters of Theophrastus*, etc. (London, 1909). For classical conceptions of Genius, compare W. W. Fowler, *Roman Ideas of Deity* (London, 1914), pp. 17 ff.

<sup>3</sup> T. Burt, *Claudii Claudiani Carmina* (Berolini, 1892) (in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, A.A., X).

Vestibuli custos vultu longaeva decoro  
 Ante fores Natura sedet, cunctisque volantes  
 Dependent membris animae. Mansura verendus  
 Scribit iura senex, numeros qui dividit astris  
 Et cursus stabilesque moras, quibus omnia vivunt  
 Ac pereunt, fixis cum legibus. Ille recenset  
 Incertum quid Martis iter certumque Tonantis  
 Prospiciat mundo; quid velox semita Lunae  
 Pigraque Saturni; quantum Cytherea sereno  
 Curriculo Phoebique comes Cyllenius erret.

[*De Consulatu Stilichonis*, II, 424 ff.]

The *senex* is a writer of the laws which determine life and death in the universe. But he is not called Genius.

A similar character appears, however, in *De Mundi Universitate*<sup>1</sup> by Bernardus Silvester, a Latin poet of the twelfth century who knew Claudian's works—a character possessed of the epithet *genius*. In a prose section, the author describes the journey of Natura in search of Urania and Physis:

Hoc igitur in loco pantomorpho persona deus venerabili et decrepitae sub imagine senectutis occurrit. Illic Oyarses quidem erat et genius in artem et officium pictoris et figurantis addictus. In subteriacente enim mundo rerum facies universa caelum sequitur sumptisque de caelo proprietatibus ad imaginem quam conversio contulit figuratur. . . . Oyarsis igitur circuli quem pantomorphon Graecia, Latinitas nominat omniformem, formas rebus omnibus et associat et ascribit.<sup>2</sup>

The venerable character in Silvester is not so fully developed as Genius in Alanus' *De Planctu Naturae*,<sup>3</sup> but he bears a strong resemblance to him. His physical appearance is like that of Genius. He is *genius* employed in the art and office of design. Though less ecclesiastical, he dwells in the celestial regions of Urania, or Theology. He performs somewhat the same duties, and has, moreover, certain associations with Natura and the creation of creatures of the

<sup>1</sup> Ed. C. S. Barach and J. Wrobel (Innsbruck, 1876) (Bibliotheca Philosophiae Mediae Aetatis).

<sup>2</sup> II, iii, pp. 38, 89–100. Design is common to characters associated with creating. Venus, for instance, is a designer in Alanus.

<sup>3</sup> Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CCX, cols. 431–82; T. Wright, *Satirical Poets of the Twelfth Century* ([Rolls Series, London], 1872), II, 429–522; translated by D. M. Moffat (New York, 1908).

lower-lying world in accordance with the ideas or images above. In quality if not wholly in name he is Genius.

Natura's complaint in Alanus' influential poem is that man has wickedly abandoned reason and devotes his creative function to sensual irregularities. The beautiful goddess-vicar therefore summons Genius to her aid. He represents her experienced morality and firmness of disposition; he is her seemingly older, harmonious, other self.<sup>1</sup> He is depicted not as young and instinct with the vigor of life, but as elderly, white-haired, yet youthful of countenance. His garb, like Natura's, changes color rapidly, and the images upon it flit away momentarily. He, too, is a designer, now aided by Truth, now hindered by Falsehood.<sup>2</sup> His clothing indicates a further development in the allegorical conception. Appropriately he has donned sacerdotal robes, and exercises his office of stern excommunication when punishment for the violation of severe Natura's laws requires his priestly authority.

When Genius appears in the *Roman de la Rose*,<sup>3</sup> he has extended his ecclesiastical work more to the confessional and away from design. His office in receiving Nature's complaint in the *Roman* is largely filled by Alanus himself in *De Planctu Naturae*. In the Old French poem, Nature, in grief over her affection for disobedient man, goes to her priest Genius, who has recorded the representations of all corruptible things.<sup>4</sup> He bids her, "queen of the world to whom everything mundane inclines,"<sup>5</sup> not to grieve, and to confess fully, trusting in his power to comfort and absolve her. When she declares that she has cause to weep, he compliments her briefly and insists that woman is easily inflamed with wrath.<sup>6</sup> Warming to the theme, he launches out into a general tirade against woman, citing Virgil, Livy, and Solomon. For instance, she cannot keep a secret. Accordingly, if a man will marry, he should know how to protect his person

<sup>1</sup> Migne, 476A, B; Wright, p. 511. A full account of him from Alanus would occupy too much space in this article; similarly with his part in the *Roman de la Rose*. It may be observed also that old men are attendant upon Natura in *Archithrenius*, a twelfth-century Latin poem by Jean de Hauteville (Wright, *op. cit.*, VIII, 369-70).

<sup>2</sup> Migne, 479C-80C; Wright, p. 517.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. F. Michel, 2 vols. (Paris, 1864). The extensive use of Alanus made by Jean de Meun in his part of the *Roman* has been thoroughly investigated; information is assembled in E. Langlois, *Origines et Source du Roman de la Rose* (Paris, 1891).

<sup>4</sup> Ll. 17214 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ll. 17232 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Ll. 17260-61.

and his goods. With gusto, Genius enforces the doctrine by relating a typical bad case. Then heedful of the divine law of generation, he continues the discussion by sage advice as to man's procedure, because the race must not expire.<sup>1</sup> Finally he returns to the immediate business, and appreciating that Nature is only too well aware of his final doctrine, assures her that he had not so spoken to reprove her.<sup>2</sup> His discourse over, he sits on an altar chair in the chapel, and awaits the confession of kneeling Nature.

She begins<sup>3</sup> with an account of creation by God, saying that God made her his chamberlain to do his will. Her power is extensive; for God wishes all creatures to obey, and all do but one. After explaining the operation of the heavens, she speaks about Death. She passes on to Freewill and Predestination under a perfect God. Now she returns to a consideration of the heavens, which, she declares, always perform their duty. An application of her views on optics to the ancient account of Vulcan's entrapping of Mars and Venus requires Genius' assent. He enjoys an opportunity to enlarge upon this Olympic episode, and discourses on women's guile. Nature admits that they are cunning of character. She resumes the subject of optics, and proceeds to other matters. The conclusion of her argument pronounces that man only resists her laws. Man had even violated his immortal soul, God's gift, by the crucifixion. Hence she asks Genius if she does not do wrong in continuing to love man.

Meanwhile she wishes to help Amours. Therefore she charges Genius to bear her salutations to him, to Dame Venus, and to all the barons except False-Seeming and Forced Abstinence, and to declare that she will support her friends and pardon those who repent.

After absolving Nature, Genius, clad in secular garments, bears off the message which she had dictated. Upon arrival, he salutes Amours' army, and states his errand. Then he delivers an oration against race suicide.<sup>4</sup> By authority of God's deputy, Nature, he excommunicates all who are disloyal to her and promises Paradise to those who love her. His harangue finished, he suddenly disappears.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ll. 17562 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Ll. 20437 ff.

<sup>2</sup> L. 17638.

<sup>5</sup> Ll. 21637-38.

<sup>3</sup> Ll. 17666 ff.

Jean de Meun's character Genius is peculiar. In Alanus' *De Planctu Naturae* that figure had been Natura's reverend secretary, a personage of statesman-like force, a great designer of Natura's scenes. In the *Roman de la Rose*, however, he has become an undignified and voluble confessor, amanuensis, and stump orator. Despite a large element of earnestness, the conception is highly humorous.

The relation of Genius to Nature in the *Roman* is thus defined by Croissandeau:<sup>1</sup> "Elle [Nature] est l' intermédiaire entre l'homme et Dieu, comme Génius entre l'homme et Nature. ... Génius est cette force surnaturel le qui toujours doit aider Nature dans son œuvre féconde pour que la passion soit respectable et sainte." But this idea of Genius' function fits the *De Planctu Naturae* better than it does the *Roman*. Jean treats Genius less seriously and does not portray him as a proper confessor. For instance, Genius shows little tact or sympathy in inveighing against women in Nature's presence, especially when Nature is already greatly distressed. A feeling confessor should be ready to listen and console—not on the watch for a chance to air his own prejudices.

It is hard to conceive Jean's Genius as a holy man. Take, for example, the incident of his reception by Amours and his troop. There is none of the solemnity of Alanus. Instead of stately music, we hear the almost childish laughter of Dame Venus. Contrast, too, the robing of Genius, first in Alanus<sup>2</sup> and then in the *Roman*.<sup>3</sup> Jean has here adapted to his own purposes the use of church forms already made in the conventions of courtly love. In a word, he, a chimerical mocker, parodies a parody.

In Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Genius continues his association with love affairs. He becomes Venus' clerk. But the author's chief purpose is to tell a series of love stories, and requires no great emphasis upon allegorical figures. Genius occupies, therefore, no such conspicuous position in the English poem as he did in the works of Alanus de Insulis and Jean de Meun.

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Marteau, *Le Roman de la Rose* (Orléans, 1878), I, xciv.

<sup>2</sup> Migne, 479B, 481B and C.

<sup>3</sup> Ll. 20409 ff.